



(U//~~FOUO~~) History Today - 12 September 2005

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(U) In May 1941, the British Royal Navy faced one of the most serious challenges to its dominance in World War II. The German battleship Bismarck had broken out of the Baltic into the North Atlantic, where it posed a considerable threat to the convoys that were Britain's lifeline.

(U) Bismarck defeated a British naval detachment consisting of HMS Hood and HMS Prince of Wales, destroying the Hood and crippling Prince of Wales, and the British subsequently lost contact with her.

(U) The British devoted considerable resources to finding out what the Germans intended to do with this important asset, and turned to ULTRA (intelligence derived from the deciphering of German messages sent using the Enigma machine) as one source of information. They were aided in their efforts by a breakdown in the principle of need-to-know by the Germans.

(U) A senior German commander, located in the Balkans, hence with no operational need to be informed about Bismarck's movements, had the curiosity to ask, and the influence within the Nazi party to receive information about the ship. An Enigma-based message told him (and, incidentally, the British) that Bismarck was making for the French port of Brest. With this information in hand, the British Admiralty was able to concentrate sufficient naval force, led by HMS King George V, to trap Bismarck, and ensure her destruction.

(U) Watch a [film clip](#) from the 1960 film *Sink the Bismarck*, in which the German battleship engages the HMS HOOD.

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